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Fostering Critical Multilingual Language Awareness through Linguistic Landscapes: A case study with future English teachers in Portugal

Abstract:

This paper presents a qualitative case study involving English language student teachers (STs) in Portugal, who participated in a program integrating Linguistic Landscapes (LLs) as a pedagogical tool. The study investigates how engaging with LLs supported the development of STs' Critical Multilingual Language Awareness. Data were collected from whole-class discussions, written reflections and student-produced materials, and analyzed using content and discourse analysis. The results reveal that the program fostered a heightened awareness of the multilingual realities of public and educational spaces and encouraged STs to reflect critically on dominant language ideologies. Despite some tensions with curriculum constraints, participants increasingly envisioned their role as language educators in more inclusive and socially responsive terms. The study concludes that LLs can serve not only as objects of sociolinguistic inquiry but also as transformative resources in language teacher education, helping future teachers address linguistic and social inequalities and embrace multilingualism as a pedagogical asset in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: linguistic landscapes, critical multilingual language awareness, teacher education, English as a foreign language, linguistic justice

Introduction

Linguistic Landscapes (LLs), originally defined as the visible languages present in public spaces (Landry, Bourhis 1997), emerged within sociolinguistics as a way to explore how language use reflects and shapes social identities, ideologies and power dynamics (Shohamy, Ben-Rafael 2015). The field has recently evolved, moving towards more intricate interpretations encompassing a wide range of semiotic signs, including those found in private spaces (Gorter, Cenoz 2024). This shift has broadened the concept of LLs to include visual, textual, auditory, tactile and material signs, which intersect to communicate complex social meanings. Contemporary LL studies now embrace multisensoriality and multimodality, comprising the languages and signs in our surroundings that are perceptible through our senses (Melo-Pfeifer 2023).

This conceptual expansion has gone hand in hand with a growing interdisciplinary engagement in LL research. While sociolinguistics remains central, fields such as anthropology, urban studies and education increasingly contribute to LL debates. In teacher education, LLs have become a valuable area of research, with studies highlighting their potential as training tools to support reflexivity, critical language awareness and interculturality, and develop key professional teaching competences (Andrade, Lourenço, Pinto 2024; Malinowski, Maxim, Dubreil 2020; Lourenço, Melo-Pfeifer forthcoming; Melo-Pfeifer 2023).

Expanding on this research, this study examines the role of LLs as resources to promote Critical Multilingual Language Awareness (CMLA), a theoretical framework and pedagogical approach that encourages individuals to engage critically with the social, cultural and ideological dimensions of multilingualism and language use (Cummins 2023; García 2017). Following the tenets of qualitative case study research (Yin 2018), the study focuses on a group of future

English teachers in Portugal, a traditionally monolingual Southern European country now grappling with the challenges of growing migration and diversity.

The premise underlying this study is that integrating LLs into the curriculum can help student teachers (STs) value linguistic diversity while recognizing and challenging implicit language ideologies in public spaces and classroom settings. These are essential competences for fostering more inclusive and linguistically just educational communities.

Theoretical background

Globalization processes and the influx of migrants and refugees into traditionally homogenous sociolinguistic contexts have made it imperative to support teachers not only in valuing diversity and supporting multilingual students but also in identifying and challenging inequalities in school settings. However, as underscored by Cárdenas Curiel *et al.* (2024: 232), “mainstream teacher preparation programs have not paid enough attention to preparing teacher candidates to engage in a ‘multilingually oriented approach’ [... and] take on an agentic role in achieving equity and excellence in education for diverse communities by encouraging emancipatory practices that honor students’ cultural and linguistic practices”.

In response to these demands, several authors (Cummins 2023; García 2017) have been defending the need to promote teachers’ Critical Multilingual Language Awareness (CMLA). This involves helping teachers examine their own language practices, recognize learners’ linguistic diversity and challenge traditional notions of language legitimized in schools. CMLA calls for teachers to be aware of societal issues to confront prevailing linguistic hierarchies, biases and inequalities in multilingual educational settings, aiming to promote social and linguistic justice (Lourenço forthcoming).

The concept of CMLA emerged within critical pedagogy scholarship from the work developed by Fairclough (1992) on Critical Language Awareness (CLA), which was a development of the earlier

concept of Language Awareness (James, Garrett, Candlin 1991). CLA regards language as a vehicle through which power dynamics, social identities and cultural meanings are constructed and contested. It encourages individuals to critically examine how language operates within broader societal structures, promoting awareness of how it connects to identity, ideology and power.

Recent developments in CLA reflect a growing commitment to equity issues, aligning the field with social and linguistic justice movements advocating for marginalized and minoritized language communities. Research in this area highlights the potential of classroom spaces that validate students' home languages and lived experiences outside school to foster a Critical *Multilingual* Language Awareness (CMLA). Prasad and Lory (2020) see CMLA as consisting of four interrelated components – cognitive, affective, performance and social – centered around a critical understanding of power. This framework highlights how learners make sense of language ideologies (cognitive), develop emotional connections to languages (affective), enact multilingualism in practice (performance), and engage with others in socially meaningful ways (social), all while interrogating and challenging dominant power structures in language use.

A prominent development in CMLA is its application in teacher education (van Gorp, De Costa 2023). Mary and Young (2023), for instance, developed a project connecting primary STs with community members and families. Through developing creative projects for the pupils (e.g., crafting bilingual books or multilingual music collections), STs gained an understanding of the importance of using children's home languages as learning tools. They also developed a heightened awareness of their role as agents of change, who challenge monolingual mindsets and dominant language ideologies that are perpetuated in classroom settings, by acknowledging hybrid language practices as the (new) norm.

In a related research, Cárdenas Curiel *et al.* (2024) observed the impact of a linguistic community walk project on STs' language ideologies and envisioned pedagogy. In this project, STs interacted and reflected on the LL surrounding the schools where they were placed

for mentored teaching practice. This involved visiting different community spaces, interacting with community members and documenting their visits. Findings suggest that STs developed an awareness of the importance of using culturally relevant materials in their classrooms. Additionally, they moved away from monolingual ideologies by critically reflecting on the marginalization of minoritized communities.

These results suggest a wider potential role of LLs in developing CMLA in teacher education. LLs provide clues about the presence of different language communities, their hierarchies and respective statuses, their visibility and silencing. They serve as symbolic sites of struggle over linguistic rights, inclusion and justice, making them appropriate tools to foster teachers' critical awareness and agency (Lourenço, Melo-Pfeifer forthcoming).

The use of LLs in teacher education has proven valuable for encouraging STs to notice and value the multilingual realities shaping education contexts (Andrade, Lourenço, Pinto 2024; Cárdenas Curiel *et al.* 2024). Engaging with LLs enables STs to examine how language use and visibility in their local environment reflect broader social hierarchies and power dynamics. As Hélot *et al.* (2012) argue, analyzing linguistic signage helps STs move beyond a surface-level reading of texts to consider the deeper sociopolitical meanings attached to them, offering insights into the power relations between languages and literacies. Through this engagement, teachers learn to recognize implicit monolingual ideologies in public and educational spaces, while positioning themselves as reflective participants and agents committed to promoting linguistic and social justice (Roos, Nicholas 2024).

Building on this growing body of research, the present study explores how LLs can promote CMLA among future English teachers in Portugal, as they envision their own teaching in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms.

The empirical study

Aims and method

This study aimed to understand how integrating LLs into a course unit of a master's program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) contributed to the development of STs' CMLA. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

- In what ways did the teaching program enhance STs' awareness of linguistic diversity?
- How did the program support STs in recognizing and challenging implicit language ideologies?
- What influence did this experience have on STs' envisioned pedagogical practices?

With these goals in mind, a qualitative case study methodology was employed (Yin 2018). This method enabled an in-depth exploration of how STs responded to LLs as both a theoretical concept and pedagogical tool, shedding light on how such engagement enhanced their awareness of linguistic diversity, supported their ability to identify and challenge linguistic policy at their faculty, and informed their professional identities as future EFL teachers in multilingual and multicultural contexts.

Participants

Participants included 16 STs enrolled in a two-year master's program in TEFL at a Faculty of Arts and Humanities of a Portuguese higher education institution. The students specialized in various teaching areas: six in English, five in English and Portuguese, three in English and Spanish, one in English and German, and one in English and History. The STs had a mean age of 25 years; nine identified as female and seven as male. While the majority of the students (12) were born in Portugal, four were born abroad (Brazil, Canada, Germany and the USA). The student from Germany was participating in a mobility program and was the only one who did not speak Portuguese as an L1.

Teaching program

Empirical data were collected from an English Didactics course, a core component of the first semester of the Master's program. This course is designed to familiarize students with contemporary goals and methodologies in English language teaching, encourage critical engagement with educational policy documents, and develop competences in lesson planning and pedagogical materials creation. A central focus of the course in the academic year 2024/2025 was exploring the concept, significance and practical applications of LLs. The STs participated in various activities, including assigned readings on LLs, photographing and analyzing the Faculty's LL, attending a lecture on the pedagogical use of LLs in English classrooms, exploring teaching modules incorporating LLs, and reflecting on issues related to linguistic justice and equality.

Data collection and analysis

A variety of data sources were gathered, including five audio recordings of classroom discussions, 16 individual written reflections, and four student-produced materials. Data were analyzed using inductive content analysis (Schreier 2012), combined with a critical reading of the participants' voices. An initial listening of the audio recordings was conducted, during which relevant excerpts were identified. These were transcribed and analyzed inductively, allowing subthemes to emerge. Individual reflections were also examined for recurring themes, critical insights and personal engagements with the topics. The reflections provided a complementary perspective that helped trace participants' evolving awareness, perceptions of language ideologies and pedagogical positioning. The analysis was subsequently deepened using principles of discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013), ensuring a richer interpretation of the data. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed: STs provided informed consent at the beginning of the semester and were assured that their identities would remain anonymous.

Results

This section is organized into three parts, corresponding to the categories that emerged from the data. These reflect the development of STs' CMLA, in relation to their increased sensitivity to linguistic diversity, their ability to identify implicit language ideologies, and the impact of these insights on their envisioned practice. Each section presents illustrative excerpts from classroom discussions and written reflections to highlight key learning moments and emerging tensions in STs' engagement with LLs. To protect anonymity, participants are referred to by a code consisting of "ST" followed by a number (e.g., ST1, ST2).

Becoming aware of linguistic diversity

One of the central activities of the course invited STs to engage with the LL of their Faculty. Working in groups of four to five, they conducted a fieldwork activity in which they photographed written instances of language displayed across the Faculty building. This activity aimed to prompt an exploration of visible language use in the institutional space and to initiate reflection on multilingual presence and organization.

In the follow-up classroom discussion, the teacher (T) invited students to reflect on their experience:

Excerpt 1

T – How was the activity? Did you find it easy? Did you know what to look for?

ST15 – Not really. But that was exciting! Because we managed to explore the Faculty and... We knew... We were expecting a few languages but not as many as we ended up finding.

T – But did you know where to look?

ST15 – We immediately went to the 3rd floor because there are many posters and signs there.

T – Did it help you discover the Faculty?

ST15 – Yeah!

ST7 – I had not realized there was an office for internships that has job offers and workshops.

ST12 – It's very organized. Here [on the 6th floor] are English events, on the other side is German, downstairs is French, then you have History... There is a logic that I was not aware of.

Excerpt 1 illustrates how the LL activity led STs to critically observe their surroundings, revealing spatial patterns that they had previously overlooked. They noticed how the Faculty's LL was organized along language-specific lines (e.g., English and German predominantly on the 6th floor, French on the 5th), mirroring the classroom allocation and departmental divisions. These spatial arrangements, while seemingly practical, implicitly reinforce a monolingual ideology in which languages are treated as discrete and bounded entities.

Following their fieldwork, students analyzed their photographic data using guiding questions adapted from Hancock (2012), prompting them to consider the presence and function of languages, types of signage and their intended audiences. Each group then presented their findings in class using PowerPoint.

Across presentations, students reported identifying more than 15 languages. Portuguese was predominant, followed by English, Spanish, French, German and Italian – the languages taught in undergraduate programs. Less commonly encountered languages such as Czech, Kazakh, Marshallese, Galician-Portuguese and Latin (written in Gothic script) were also noted, often identified through tools such as Google Translate or ChatGPT. One group also recognized Braille signage, demonstrating an expanded interpretation of what constitutes the LL.

Most signs were official notices or event advertisements placed by the Faculty, and book titles visible on corridor bookshelves. Several groups pointed out unexpected discoveries, including one moment that sparked extended debate – the observation that the display stand dedicated to Russian language activities was empty. While some STs interpreted this as a reflection of the marginalization of Russian due to the war in Ukraine, others recalled the recent dismissal of a long-time

Russian lecturer who was accused of disseminating Russian propaganda, raising questions about ideological conflicts and their tangible effects on linguistic representation in academic spaces.

The scarcity of bi-/plurilingual signage was also noted. Most bilingual signs (Portuguese/English) were limited to cafeteria notices or basic instructions (e.g. “Pessoal autorizado/Staff only”), indicating that the Faculty’s visual language practices still operate within largely monolingual parameters. In contrast to this pattern, a particularly illustrative example is shown in Figure 1. This is a floor graphic that displays the word “kitchen” in multiple languages, all arranged around a Latin root word. The words are grouped according to language families, emphasizing the historical and morphological relationships among the languages.

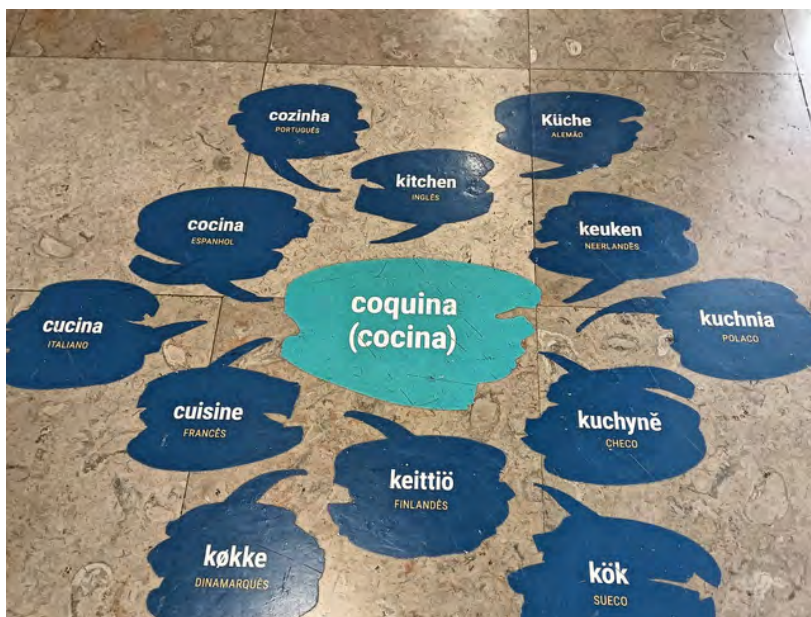


Figure 1. Example of a multilingual floor graphic at the Faculty

Excerpt 2 captures the classroom discussion that followed STs' observation of this graphic:

Excerpt 2

T – You saw the figure with the words written in different languages. What do you think is the reason for doing that?

ST2 – I think it's like “We are such a good Faculty and we teach so many languages.” So here is a curiosity: this is how you say “kitchen” in Dutch.

ST13 – I think that is not the idea. Because we have the root in the middle and the other words in other languages around. It is just to say, “Look at the root, these are the morphological relations here.”

ST12 – I think it is to say that we are a community of people who speak languages that share certain characteristics. The goal is to promote an awareness of linguistic diversity.

This moment demonstrates how STs engaged in interpretative negotiation of the visual symbol's intent and meaning. While some viewed it as a promotional display, others interpreted it as an educational tool linking linguistic forms across languages. ST12's comment points to a developing awareness of linguistic interconnectedness, as she tentatively suggests that the figure could aim to promote an appreciation of diversity. This interpretation hints at a growing sensitivity to the symbolic role of language in constructing multilingual identity.

In short, this subsection highlights how the LL activity fostered a deeper awareness of the linguistic diversity within the institutional environment, serving as a springboard for students to uncover underlying ideologies embedded in spatial and visual language practices.

Recognizing implicit language ideologies

In another moment of the whole-class discussion that followed the LL presentations, several STs questioned the predominance of Portuguese across the Faculty's LL, particularly in official and information signage. They expressed surprise and disappointment at how monolingual the visual environment appeared, despite the Faculty's academic focus on languages.

Excerpt 3

ST9 – I got out there and I was like, “Why is everything written in Portuguese?” So, I was upset. I studied in Spain and all the signs were in so many languages. It’s incredible how, in my Faculty... because we are studying languages...

ST2 – At the entrance, there are statues with signs explaining who they were, but they are in Portuguese. We have a massive tourism industry, an Erasmus mobility program, so at least these should be translated into English.

ST1 – Even the ads and the information are all in Portuguese. I speak some Portuguese but not enough to read all this. It doesn’t really feel like this university is friendly to people who don’t speak Portuguese, honestly. I’ve heard from other [mobility] students as well, and they also complain.

This discussion illustrates a critical shift in perspective, as STs recognize how the seemingly “neutral” use of Portuguese in public signage implicitly marginalizes non-Portuguese speakers, particularly foreign students and visitors. Despite the Faculty’s commitment to language education and internationalization, its LL reinforces monolingual norms and fails to reflect the multilingual reality of its student population.

Building on this moment, the teacher explicitly links the conversation to broader questions of linguistic justice:

Excerpt 4

T – Coming in as a foreign student [from Germany] and seeing everything written in Portuguese, how does that make you feel in terms of belonging?

ST1 – It would be nice to see your language, just to see “Hallo”, it makes you feel at home in a way. Just reading your own language in a foreign country... I don’t know... It’s a nice view.

This comment suggests that even small gestures (e.g. including a greeting in multiple languages) can contribute to a stronger sense of belonging and inclusion. ST1’s reflection underscores how language use in public spaces is not only functional but deeply symbolic, influencing individuals’ feelings of visibility and acceptance. These insights

were further developed in the written reflections. When asked to reflect on what they had learned about linguistic diversity and social justice, several students demonstrated an emerging awareness of the ideological power of language in public space.

Excerpt 5

The languages we see displayed around us and the ones we hear influence our subconscious understanding of the world. If we never see our mother tongue used in signs or ads, we might not associate it with commerce and administrative tasks. That could mean that our native language takes the back seat in our daily lives. If you never see something, never hear about something, is it really possible? Is it really real? Social justice, that is, having everyone represented and given the power of having their needs and wants heard, is not something that we just choose and move on. It cannot truly exist without action. Changing the Linguistic Landscape to be more inclusive is one step in the right direction. (ST5)

This reflection reveals an understanding of how language visibility affects identity and power. ST5 moves beyond observation into advocacy, positioning inclusive LLs not only as reflective of social justice values but as actionable steps toward equity.

By the end of this sequence, many STs began to shift from passive observers of language practices to active participants in a conversation about linguistic inclusion. Their responses suggest an emerging sense of agency, a recognition that change in the LL is possible and necessary to ensure that everyone feels acknowledged and welcome, including their future students.

Envisioning future practice

Following the whole-class discussion and reflection on linguistic justice, STs attended a lecture on the pedagogical potential of LLs in the EFL classroom. They also explored teaching modules from the Erasmus+ project LoCALL (Local Linguistic Landscapes for Global Language Education in the School Context), which illustrated how

LLs can be integrated into (language) education in meaningful and critical ways.

After engaging with these resources, STs were asked to reflect on the question: “Would you like to explore LLs with your future EFL students? Why (not)?” Some responses revealed a firm rejection of the idea, grounded in concerns about curriculum demands and the perceived disconnect between LL activities and language learning goals:

Excerpt 6

I don’t think I would use LLs in the classroom, because students might not actually engage with the English language itself, and the activities might take too much time from the rest of the curriculum. (ST1)

Realistically, I don’t think I will spend much time directly creating and implementing lessons focusing on LL with my students. There is a curriculum to follow and a book to get through. (ST9)

These responses reflect a recurring tension: while STs seemed to have developed a more critical awareness of linguistic diversity, they still perceive the EFL curriculum as primarily monolingual and rigidly focused on textbook learning. The idea of incorporating LL activities, which are perceived as interdisciplinary, time-consuming and potentially off-track, seems at odds with their understanding of institutional expectations. This reveals a lingering vision of the EFL classroom as linguistically closed, even when many students bring multilingual repertoires into that space.

Nonetheless, many STs recognized the pedagogical potential of LL-based activities. They highlighted the value of LLs in fostering “linguistic awareness, spatial awareness, world knowledge and curiosity” (ST4), and contributing to developing “oral skills, recognition of different languages, creativity, and citizenship, competences not usually developed in traditional classroom activities” (ST16). Moreover, several STs proposed concrete and critical uses of LLs to raise awareness around issues of linguistic justice. For instance, one ST suggested using viral videos featuring specific accents as springboards for discussions about regional varieties of English, speech patterns and code-switching.

Excerpt 7

There are websites and social media platforms that have their own register and speech patterns, or even unique interaction rules that are not acceptable offline (Tumblr is a great example). What a good way to discuss speech patterns, code-switching and how we change the way we speak and the words we choose to use depending on the context – this can show us hidden bias and stereotypes that affect how we treat others. I would say that small but frequent, creative and intentional moments of conversation, prompted by thought-provoking images or audios of the LL, are very powerful. (ST5)

In short, while institutional constraints continue to shape how STs envision their teaching practice, many began to see themselves as change agents capable of using LLs to challenge linguistic hierarchies and promote inclusion. This growing sense of pedagogical purpose, grounded in CMLA, suggests that LL-based work has the potential to influence not only how STs see the world but also how they aim to teach within it.

Discussion and conclusion

This case study, developed with a group of pre-service English teachers in Portugal, aimed to explore the potential of a teaching program centered on LLs in promoting CMLA. Results indicate that STs became more attuned to the multilingual realities surrounding them, even within institutional spaces that are often perceived as monolingual. Through participating in diverse activities around LLs and engaging in individual and dialogic reflection, STs developed a more critical understanding of how language operates as a symbol of social inclusion or exclusion. In particular, they began to notice how certain languages are privileged in public and educational spaces, while others remain invisible or marginal.

This growing CLA extended into reflections on their future teaching. While some STs expressed hesitation about the practicality of implementing LL-based lessons within the constraints of a rigid

curriculum, others highlighted the pedagogical value of these activities in promoting curiosity, creativity, critical thinking and citizenship. They recognized that LLs can help learners connect classroom content with the linguistic realities of their communities and reflect on broader societal issues such as linguistic justice and bias.

These findings align with recent literature on CMLA, which frames language (teacher) education as a space for promoting equity and social justice. Cummins (2023) and García (2017) argue that teachers must be equipped not only to recognize linguistic diversity but also to confront the power structures that shape language use and representation. Similar to what Prasad and Lory (2020) propose, STs in this study began to engage cognitively, affectively, performatively and socially with the complexities of language. They also demonstrated an emerging willingness to position themselves as change agents who can challenge monolingual ideologies and support multilingual practices.

However, the program also exposed tensions between institutional constraints and the desire to promote more critical and responsive pedagogy. While some STs struggled to see how LL work could be integrated into traditional EFL instruction, others began to articulate a broader vision of their role as educators: not just to teach English, but to foster language awareness, validate students' diverse linguistic repertoires and cultivate socially aware citizens.

These findings have implications for teacher education. Firstly, they highlight the need for language teacher education programs to move beyond a narrow focus on linguistic competence in the target language and include opportunities for STs to engage critically with multilingualism and linguistic diversity. Secondly, they suggest the relevance of creating spaces for STs to experiment with alternative, student-centered approaches that value learners' identities and lived experiences. Finally, they underscore the need for teacher education to address structural barriers that discourage innovation, such as curriculum rigidity and the persistence of monolingual norms in EFL teaching. This involves explicitly preparing STs to challenge these constraints and to advocate for more inclusive and just language education practices.

Overall, the findings underscore the relevance of using LLs not only as objects of sociolinguistic analysis but also as valuable resources for educating teachers who are better prepared to challenge implicit bias in language education, address linguistic and social inequalities, and embrace multilingualism as an asset in the EFL classroom. It is fundamental, therefore, to conduct further research on the potential of LLs in teacher education, a field that remains underexplored (Andrade, Lourenço, Pinto 2024).

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